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C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 003489

SIPDIS

NSC FOR TOM SHANNON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/17/2014

TAGS: PHUM PREL AR CU MOLINA

SUBJECT: MOLINA INCIDENT CREATES TURMOIL WITHIN ARGENTINE

MFA

REF: A. BUENOS AIRES 3406

1B. BUENOS AIRES 3364

1C. BUENOS AIRES 1903

Classified By: Ambassador Lino Gutierrez for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) Following the Molina incident at the Argentine embassy in Havana on December 16, Chief of Cabinet Alberto Fernandez told reporters on Friday that a "clarification" would be made later in the day regarding the status of the Argentine ambassador to Cuba, Raul Taleb, and the MFA chief of cabinet, Eduardo Valdes, following reports that both would be asked to resign for allegedly mishandling the Molina affair. (Indeed, the pro-Kirchner Pagina 12 was already referring to Valdes as the "ex-chief of cabinet.") The Fernandez press conference follows stories in all the major dailies reporting on President Kirchner's fury at the bungled attempt to secure permission from the Cuban government for Molina to travel to Argentina.

12. (C) Castro's continued refusal to allow Molina and her mother to travel to Argentina (reflets) continues to complicate Kirchner's policy of "constructive engagement" with the Castro regime and has now caused a rift between the Casa Rosada and members of its Foreign Ministry team. One of the Foreign Minister's senior advisors, Ambassador Fernando Petrella, confirmed to the DCM on Friday that Kirchner is very upset with the way the MFA has handled the entire Molina affair in general (including the embassy incident) and, in particular, with the Foreign Ministry making public his personal and emotional letter to Castro requesting permission for Molina and her mother to travel to Argentina for Christmas. Castro's public rejection of that request did not reflect well on Kirchner's prestige. Petrella said that Kirchner was also upset with Bielsa's statements regarding Molina while in Washington to meet with the Secretary.

13. (C) Comment: While we have no confirmation at this time that Valdes and Taleb are out, if heads are to roll, they are convenient scapegoats. Reports that Bielsa's job is also in jeopardy are likely premature. Already an outsider to Kirchner's tight inner circle, Bielsa's position has no doubt been further eroded. In his favor, however, is the fact that Kirchner has no ready replacement for Bielsa and would likely be very reluctant to make such a change on the eve of Argentina assuming the presidency of the UN Security Council in January. Kirchner's anger and embarrassment over the handling of the Molina case, while publicly directed at his own foreign affairs team, is ultimately a stinging reminder of the pitfalls of "constructive engagement" with the Castro regime.

GUTIERREZ